CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

Fred Chappell

C906
N87s
NO.42

THE LIBRARY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF
NORTH CAROLINA
AT CHAPEL HILL

THE COLLECTION OF
NORTH CAROLINIANA
PRESENTED BY

North Caroliniana Society

C906
N87s
no.42

Center of the Universe

Fred Chappell

FRED CHAPPELL

Illustration by Dwane Powell, courtesy of The News & Observer

NORTH CAROLINIANA SOCIETY IMPRINTS
H. G. Jones, General Editor, Numbers 1-42

No. 1. *An Evening at Monticello: An Essay in Reflection* (1978)
by Edwin M. Gill
No. 2. *The Paul Green I Know* (1978)
by Elizabeth Lay Green
No. 3. *The Albert Coates I Know* (1979)
by Gladys Hall Coates
No. 4. *The Sam Ervin I Know* (1980)
by Jean Conyers Ervin
No. 5. *Sam Ragan* (1981)
by Neil Morgan
No. 6. *Thomas Wolfe of North Carolina* (1982)
edited by H. G. Jones
No. 7. *Gertrude Sprague Carraway* (1982)
by Sam Ragan
No. 8. *John Fries Blair* (1983)
by Margaret Blair McCuiston
No. 9. *William Clyde Friday and Ida Howell Friday* (1984)
by Georgia Carroll Kyser and William Brantley Aycock
No. 10. *William S. Powell, Historian* (1985)
by David Stick and William C. Friday
No. 11. *"Gallantry Unsurpassed"* (1985)
edited by Archie K. Davis
No. 12. *Mary and Jim Semans, North Carolinians* (1986)
by W. Kenneth Goodson
No. 13. *The High Water Mark* (1986)
edited by Archie K. Davis
No. 14. *Raleigh and Quinn: The Explorer and His Boswell* (1987)
edited by H. G. Jones
No. 15. *A Half Century in Coastal History* (1987)
by David Stick
No. 16. *Thomas Wolfe at Eighty-seven* (1988)
edited by H. G. Jones
No. 17. *A Third of a Century in Senate Cloakrooms* (1988)
by William McWhorter Cochrane
No. 18. *The Emma Neal Morrison I Know* (1989)
by Ida Howell Friday
No. 19. *Thomas Wolfe's Composition Books* (1990)
edited by Alice R. Cotten
No. 20. *My Father, Burke Davis* (1990)
by Angela Davis-Gardner
No. 21. *A Half Century with Rare Books* (1991)
by Lawrence F. London

[Continued on inside back cover]

Center of the Universe

by

Fred Chappell

Together with Tributes to Fred Chappell on the Occasion of
His Acceptance of the North Caroliniana Society Award for 2007
15 May 2007

Chapel Hill 27514-8890
NORTH CAROLINIANA SOCIETY
2007

NORTH CAROLINIANA SOCIETY IMPRINTS
Number 42
H. G. Jones, General Editor, Nos. 1-42

This edition is limited to
five hundred copies of
which this is number

Photo Credits: Cover, DWANE POWELL, Courtesy of the *News & Observer*. All other color photos by JERRY W. COTTEN. Black and white photos by JAN G. HENSLEY.

Copyright © 2007 by
North Caroliniana Society
UNC Campus Box 3930, Wilson Library
Chapel Hill, North Caroliniana 27514-8890
Http://www.ncsociety.org
Email: hgjones@email.unc.edu
All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America

C906
N87s
no.42

PART I

Center of the Universe

by

Fred Chappell

Delivered before the North Caroliniana Society's Members and Friends in Elliott University Center, University of North Carolina at Greensboro Greensboro, 15 May 2007

GIFT, NORTH CAROLINIANA SOCIETY

EDITOR'S NOTE

In the afternoon of Tuesday, 15 May 2007, preceding the banquet at which he accepted the North Caroliniana Society Award for 2007, Fred Chappell amused, charmed, and informed his audience in Cone Auditorium of the Elliott University Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His address is published in its entirety, along with tributes paid to him by fellow literary figures—Kelly Cherry, J. Peder Zane, George Singleton, and Marianne Gingher. Chappell thus became the thirty-seventh recipient of the North Caroliniana Society Award for extraordinary contributions to North Carolina's history, literature, and culture. On the previous page he is shown holding the sterling cup representing the award; at left is a photograph of the award trophy that is displayed in the North Carolina Collection of the University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill. In the photo above, he accepts the cup from Willis P. Whichard, president of the Society. The Society is grateful to the Friends of the UNCG Libraries for cosponsoring the banquet.—*H. G. JONES*

Center of the Universe

Fred Chappell

It was about 335 BC when Aristotle wrote his famous cosmological treatise, *De caelo,* in which he posited North Carolina as the center of the physical universe. There was immediate speculation as to how long it would take for the Old North State to be recognized as the literary center of the universe and there is still strong debate as to when this recognition finally took place.

The difficulty in determining a precise date for this latter historical point stems from a number of complicating factors. Since North Carolina was discovered, or invented, by a poet, Sir Walter Raleigh, should not its literary ascendance be dated at 1585 AD with the establishment of the Roanoke Colony? Or should the date be pushed forward to the twentieth century and the unheralded, lightning-bolt appearance of Thomas Wolfe and *Look Homeward, Angel*? Or to the twenty-first and the publication of Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*?

These were signal events, but they are not lonesome promontories; rather, they are tall peaks in a landscape which bears the appearance of a long range of literary Alps.

Another problem for the historical dating is that North Carolina is a largish state and divided, like Caesar's Gaul, into three parts: the noble mountains, the pleasant foothills, and the terra incognita that traverses a terrain of swamps and beer joints until rebuffed in its lassitudinous progress by the Atlantic Ocean. A number of literary centers have dotted the Carolina map: Asheville, Chapel Hill, Winston-Salem, Durham, Wilmington, Benson, Apex, Four Oaks, Hillsborough, and Frog Level. It was not until the supremacy of Greensboro was acknowledged and its confirmed superiority drew the other cities into unwilling but submissive orbits that North Carolina was firmly established as the literary capital of the universe.

That event took place today, May 15, 2007, when the North Caroliniana Society generously moved its annual meeting to Greensboro in a graceful gesture of obeisance. I would like to assure the Society that Greensboro is extremely grateful for this act of kindness and will forever hold this unparalleled event in happy memory.

While we are on the subject of gratitude, please allow me to express my personal gratitude to the Society. It is impossible for me to express much of all the thankfulness in my heart, but I would like to make it known that it

is palpably there. Of the members of the Society to whom I owe special gratitude, I shall mention Messrs. Jan Hensley, Jim Clark, and H. G. Jones—these among many, many others. I am grateful to The University of North Carolina Greensboro and to my long-suffering colleagues there. For forty years I was allowed to make my living in a profession I enjoyed so much I felt a little guilty about drawing a salary. But the long-suffering of UNCG pales to snowiness compared to that of my sister and brother-in-law, Becky and Ed Anderson, and to that of the great champion of patience and tolerance, Susan Nicholls Chappell. If they are willing to stand and be thanked, I'd be grateful to them once more—and to my son, Heath, and his wife, Patty, also.

When I say my friends, colleagues, and relatives have been "long-suffering," I mean it, for I am no saint—. . . .

I'm not even a Republican—and only a few short months ago that qualification was widely thought to be the first prerequisite of American sainthood.

There are many others also to whom I would like to express my appreciative thanks, but your name is Legion and so these expressions will have to be made privately. I look forward to doing that.

Meanwhile, let us return to the subject at hand, the fact of North Carolina's universal literary superiority.

One of the most important dates in the establishment of this datum is 1994 when an anthology of poetry called *The Language They Speak Is Things to Eat* appeared. It was edited by Michael McFee and published by The University of North Carolina Press and the title of the volume would seem to announce, or at least to imply, an awareness of that superiority:

Not "the language *we* speak" but "the language *they* speak is things to eat."

Now, this important anthology did not pursue any sort of separatist theme and its title actually is a line taken from a poem that says quite a different thing. The poem is by James Applewhite; it is called "Some Words for Fall," *fall* meaning autumn:

> The tobacco's long put in. Whiffs of it curing
> Are a memory that rustles the sweet gums.
> Pete and Joe paid out, maybe two weeks ago.
> The way their hard hands hook a bottle of Pepsi Cola,
> It always makes me lonesome for something more.
> The language they speak is things to eat.
> Barbeque's smell shines blue in the wind.
> Titles of Nehi Grape, Dr. Pepper, are nailed
> Onto barns, into wood sides silvered and alive,
> Like the color pork turns in heat over ashes.

I wish I could step through the horizon's frame
Into a hand-hewn dirt-floored room.
People down home in eastern N.C.,
When they have that unlimited longing,
They smell the packhouse leavings.
They look at leaves like red enamel paint
On soft drink signs by the side of the road
That drunks in desperation have shot full of holes.
No words they have are enough.
Sky in rags between riverbank trees
Pieces the torn banner of a heroic name.

Instead of celebrating any feeling of superiority over his subject matter, the poet actually would like to destroy the invisible partition that divides him from it: "I wish I could step through the horizon's frame / Into a hand-hewn dirt-floored room."

But, alas, such a consummation is not to be. History, economics, and present circumstance triumphantly conspire to keep poet and subject matter in different metaphysical spaces.

A prominent facet of the problem of this apartness lies in the necessities of literary composition: close observation that is both dispassionate and impassioned, feelings of sympathy that are tainted by the habits of analysis, confidence in expression that is continually undermined by the imperatives of self-criticism.

Our Tar Heel poets have written scores, probably hundreds, of these poems shadowed by the sense of separation. Counting on your kind indulgence, I shall read another of these, a poem called "Rain light," in which the ostensible subject is an episode of waiting for someone in a room of an art museum, someone who is late in arriving. It was written by Gibbons Ruark:

The same room, the same window, only this time
Darkened against the falling rain.
You are not here. For a little while I'm

Happy, given the Four Last Songs again,
Given a poetry better than my mind,
An old man walking down a city lane,

Unwilling to explain but passing kind.
I take these measures in a kind of calm
That deepens me until I find

Myself almost believing in the balm
Imagined in a solitude of pain.
Almost believing in the old man's palm

Descending in the air instead of rain.
The long desire to dwindle down to nothing
Nearly holding sway, I say your name,

Your absence rises in me like a song
Or story I don't know the ending of.
Opening the curtains, I can't say how long

I'll sit here waiting for you,
Watching the paintings shine like windows
In the sunlight even a rainy day lets through.

A few months ago, Susan and I attended a gathering of Appalachian writers up in Emory, Virginia. It was a lot of fun and lots of nifty people were there—John Lang, who was one of our hosts, John Ehle and his lovely Rosemary Harris, Katherine Stripling Byer—oh, lots.... During one of the panels, an audience member asked Lee Smith if she ever felt like an outsider to the literary scene because of her Appalachian background. Lee replied that she'd always felt like an outsider simply because she was a writer. Her words reminded me of one of my favorite lines. When someone asked the grand Latin American novelist, José Luis Doñoso, why he became a writer, he answered, "Because I wasn't invited to the party." I have repeated his remark many times and once to a friend who said, "Well, I went to that party and everybody there seemed as lost and lonesome as me."

I have begun to wonder if Señor Doñoso's sentence isn't just a tad too melodramatic. If the writer really is an outsider, maybe it's because she only occupies a position somewhat analogous to that of an illegal immigrant who is welcomed, or at least tolerated, we are told, because that person will take the job no other Americans desire to do.

I don't know if that description is true of writers in general or only of poets.

But if it is true of writers, I wonder if it might help to account in part for North Carolina's dominance of world literature: that there was a largish number of us some years back who didn't know any better than to take the job nobody else wanted. There are a lot of disadvantages in being a writer, a lot of debilitating consequences, but we don't need to talk about those. Most of them you can figure out, just by looking at me.

It helps to keep a time-frame in mind. If we travel our minds back to

the 1950s, it may seem evident that the reason so few Tar Heels wanted the job of being a writer was because it never occurred to them as a reasonable possibility. A writer, we thought, was someone who worked for a newspaper, or in radio or the new-fangled TV, or who ground out tired phrases for weary politicians, or who scribbled snow-banks of secret poems and stuffed them into attic shoeboxes. Of course, there were other sorts of writers, those who wrote novels, short stories, essays, screenplays, and readable poems, but they inhabited a gleaming, vaporish world unreachable from the confines of tobacco patch and hayfield, a universe they shared with dragons, unicorns, and Betty Grable.

It may have been the isolation of Tar Heel culture from the larger culture that helped to produce individuals whose feelings of personal isolation were immoderately enhanced. Young writers at that time wanted to become what no one else they knew wanted to become. In a metropolis like New York, a sixteen-year-old who admitted to literary ambitions would probably have been derided or teased by his comrades, but they wouldn't necessarily consider him lunatic. In Chicago or Los Angeles she might well have been encouraged. But in the Carolina packhouse or cornfield that kind of aspirant was a lusus naturae, a bit of a freak.

I won't press this point too far because it falsifies with emphasis. When I taught classes in fiction, I used to try to illustrate how a moment of acute self-awareness can open to a feeling of isolation. "Imagine that you are sent by your parents to visit Aunt Sudie and Uncle Jake at their home in Mare's Nest, about 100 miles from your own home. While you are there, Aunt Sudie says that she has arranged with her friend Bella for you to escort Bella's niece Prudence to a spring dance. Dutifully, you do so. Prudence is pretty and shy and you arrive and keep safely within the trace-chains of your best manners. The evening wears on, the dancing grows livelier, the chatter of all the strangers more animated and ever louder. Suddenly, for no reason you can put a name to, you step to the side of the dance floor, look about you, and think, What am I doing here? Who are these people? Who am I? —Just at that instant, and maybe only for that instant," I told my students, "you have taken the stance of a writer."

I tried out that scenario once too often. One of the numerous students of the time who all called themselves "Strider" and who all sat in the back of the classroom piped up. "Well, if that's the case," said this particular Strider, "I must be a great novelist. I feel that way all the time."

His sentence rings true. There must be certain moments for all of us in which we suddenly feel, reasonably or not, like rank outsiders. I have noted it in others upon certain occasions. Young bridesmaids of twelve or thirteen or so seem to be enjoying the rituals and festivities and then will suddenly withdraw; their gazes turn inward; they clutch their nosegays more tightly.

"What is my place in the scheme of this?" they seem to ask themselves as the shadows of doubtful futures steal into their hearts.

We may notice such flashes of timorous self-awareness in others upon other occasions too: among, unathletic, modest young men required to strip for a military physical examination; within a person who has been sitting half attentive during a sermon until one certain phrase strikes to the center of his mind; within someone asked to wait in the hallways of a medical clinic until the doctor has read the charts and photographs and returns with a diagnosis.

So the writer may seem to be speaking egotistically when she remarks upon her feeling of separation, of alienation from her fellow citizens, yet she probably articulates feelings common to all, though maybe not willingly acknowledged by all. "The Soul selects her own Society," Emily Dickinson said, and in her single being is a "divine Majority."

These moments of self-awareness can be so intense as to be shocking and the writer must endure the shock of them for hours and days on end when engaged in literary composition. There is an ugly danger involved with this situation. The divine Majority may turn into an arrogant Tyranny if, after selecting her own Society, the Soul shuts the door for good and all, closing others out because her sense of superiority to them overmasters her. Then her pride shrivels into a foolish, childish, inane vanity and the ministering graces of solitude become the supercilious demons of disdain.

But for most, the latter hazard is no continual temptation. We reach out to others; we need to communicate with others, even if the only present message we have to bring is that we feel apart from them. In this way, isolation can be a pathway to communality. "Are you lonesome, lost, and bewildered, brother?" "Yes, brother, I am." "Well, so am I, or I wouldn't have thought to ask you. It looks like we are comrades, after all."

It was by following this line of reasoning that I came to understand why poetry is so popular with the reading public, why poetry titles so overcrowd the bestseller list, why so many feature films and television series are taken from the works of Edwin Arlington Robinson, Emily Dickinson, and Michael McFee. It is because there is a great commonwealth of lonelies out there and it includes a host of harried, extraordinarily busy soccer moms. When we recall Edward Hopper's famous nocturnal painting, "Nighthawks," the one that shows a few silent figures taking coffee in a late-night diner, it usually takes a moment or two of reflection to realize that the artist has actually rendered a crowd scene. There are thousands of us squeezed into that frame, but the painter has chosen to represent us as invisible.

Does the simple act of confessing an awareness of self-conscious solitude contain within it a plea for communion with others? Here is a poem by Robert Watson titled "Going Nowhere Alone at Night":

All houses stand in pools of black.
A police car's blue roof-eye trails
Me down this Fall night of drifting
Leaves. I drift. I drift. It's wrong
To fall in love so many times,
So many times. The yellow leaves
This Fall more beautiful than last.

They curb me with a siren cry.
"Destination? Your license please!"
"Nowhere. I can't sleep." O the stars
Warm, luminous as... It's wrong
With half-dressed trees so lovely now
As you and they were and all are.
The blue light spins away in leaves.

Why don't I root myself in bed;
A black tree in rows, unmoving,
Of black trees? It's wrong to fall in love
So many times, so many times.

Is it really wrong—or is it absolutely necessary? The loneliness of the nightwalker has increased his awareness of the love he bears. If it has caused him to question the legitimacy or soundness of that love, that is another way in which it has increased the intensity of his self-awareness. In avowing love for another and by admitting to self-questioning, the poet has decreased some of the unhappy distance between him and his subject matter.

It is difficult to try to determine the metaphysical space the author of a poem or story inhabits. If we think of the world of literary discourse as being divided, like North Carolina, into three parts with divinity above and humanity below, there looks to be a middle area between them in which the authorial point of view is lodged. A little below divinity, a little above the common ruck of humanity—it is an area we usually think of as being inhabited by the Bush family. Or the Kennedys.

Anyhow, it is a space separate from that of the subject matter and from the audience for the work.

There are poets and fiction writers who have fought to eliminate the perceived superior space of the author. Among poets, Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, Paul Green, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Pablo Neruda, Charles Bukowski and others have insisted that they are one with their audience, that they lay hands directly upon experience and do not *treat* it in the manner of the more finical scribblers like Henry James and Wallace Stevens. That is a bold

claim and may sometimes lead to a further distancing than does the usual approach. In reading Whitman, for instance, one has now and then to resist the impulse to say, "Could you back off a little, Walt, honey? Your beard is tickling my ear." Sandburg's motives are certainly generous, but his assertion of personal intimacy may feel a little presumptuous to shy and maidenly types like myself.

I would hope that to most readers, most audiences, this whole question would appear trivial, if not precious. It could come to seem the sort of topic a writer or lecturer invented because he could think of nothing substantial to bring when it fell his duty to address a meeting of the North Caroliniana Society. *What is all this distance-and-separation stuff?* the listeners must wonder. *Just sing the song. Just tell the story.*

Poets in America don't often draw hecklers, but in other parts of the world, the heckling of a poet is an honorable custom. It happened once that I was giving a reading at George Mason University and there was an Irish poet in attendance and he had been giving the good Guinness a long pull and when I began mumbling my third offering of the evening, he sounded out: "Och, get on with it, man! We could hang a priest with less blitheren!" My only response was to grin and turn scarlet because his imperative would have to go unfulfilled. When I thought ahead to the dozen other pieces I had planned to read, I realized that they were all in the same mode, ole Fred talking to himself again.

If I had been properly conversant with Irish poetic protocols at the time, I would have thrown a chair at him and all would have been well, the evening by his lights considered a roaring success. But in my ignorance, I took his complaint seriously and in the ensuing months I began to ponder how one might establish a more comradely, less "auctorial" relationship with an audience, and I thought it might actually be possible.

—I am not usually so sanguine about prospects of this sort. I am no rosy-lensed, dewy-eyed optimist of Utopian outlook.

—I'd make a poor-quality Democrat, I reckon.

There have been writers who managed to establish a close and affectionate rapport with a live audience, but the ones I know about mostly emphasized the authorial distancing. Charles Dickens was immensely successful on the platform, but he came onto a darkened stage, lit the candle on a table bare except for his book, carefully removed his formal white gloves, and began to intone in his actor's voice. Mark Twain achieved what may be called an adorable stage persona, but as he stood there in his white suit and with his aureole of silver hair and the celebrated boat-pilot's mustache, nobody ever thought of him as Bubba. Carl Sandberg established a close relationship

with his listeners, but he cheated; he carried a guitar.

I have never threatened anyone in that manner. In the first place, I have sufficient crimes on my head without adding a guitar to the indictments. And in the *real* first place, the author's stage persona is not to be identified with the author of the work, any more than an actor who portrays John Wilkes Booth on stage should be tried for the murder of the President.

There is a further problem with writers and their stage personae. Most of us are not trained actors. We don't know how to project the kind of personality we desire an audience to accept. When I try to come on with all the majesty of James Earl Jones, folks often think I am trying to impersonate Barney Fife. More than once I have accidentally heard my own voice in a recording and thought, "Who is that backwater hick and why is he mutilating my poem?"

The ideal state of things would be the removal of the author entirely from his or her productions, for the author to disappear, to be absorbed into the subject matter, so that the words on the page are not secondhand descriptions but reports from the heart of things spoken directly to a listener. This is a foolish desire, but it is one that a great, aching number of writers have harbored and that many of the more idealistic have striven to achieve. Most of us, though, grudgingly bow to the facts of the case. In James Applewhite's "Some Words for Fall" the speaker can only *wish* to step through the horizon's frame and enter physically the world of the poem.

But here is a poem that attempts to depict that ideal situation and, by transferring the human element of the author to another, similarly talented, animal makes an intriguing, indeed an enticing, case. It is by Randall Jarrell and it is called "The Mockingbird":

> Look one way and the sun is going down,
> Look the other and the moon is rising.
> The sparrow's shadow's longer than the lawn.
> The bats squeak: "Night is here"; the birds cheep: "Day is gone."
> On the willow's highest branch, monopolizing
> Day and night, cheeping, squeaking, soaring,
> The mockingbird is imitating life.
>
> All day the mockingbird has owned the yard.
> As light first woke the world, the sparrows trooped
> Onto the seedy lawn: the mocking bird
> Chased them off shrieking. Hour by hour, fighting hard
> To make the world his own, he swooped
> On thrushes, thrashers, jays, and chickadees—
> At noon he drove away a big black cat.

Now, in the moonlight, he sits there and sings.
A thrush is singing, then a thrasher, then a jay—
Then, all at once, a cat begins meowing.
A mockingbird can imitate anything.
He imitates the world he drove away
So well that for a minute, in the moonlight,
Which one's the mockingbird? which one's the world?

Such skill in the imitation of life is beyond the compass of most non-dramatic poets I know of. It is certainly well beyond my reach. And if I think it is beyond the reach of every last one of us, I may well be wrong. I'm not infallible, after all.

—Hey, I'm not even a Libertarian.

I do remain, however, your faithful friend, ole Fred, and if anyone here harbors questions or comments to which I might be able to respond, I'll do my best. Thank you.

PART II

Tributes to Fred Chappell

by

Kelly Cherry
J. Peder Zane
George Singleton
Marianne Gingher

Delivered at a Banquet Honoring Fred Chappell on His Acceptance of the North Caroliniana Society Award, Elliott University Center, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 15 May 2007

Introduction

James W. Clark, Jr.

Good evening. The speech Fred Chappell delivered earlier this afternoon will be printed in the *North Caroliniana Society Imprint* due out this fall, and those in attendance tonight, as well as all members of the Society, will receive a copy by mail.

What follows now is a little drama we might call "Our Fred." My role is that of the stage manager, the person charged with moving the action along. The players in "Our Fred" are four distinguished writers selected by Fred himself—one from Virginia, one from South Carolina, and two who call North Carolina home. What Kelly Cherry, Peder Zane, George Singleton, and Marianne Gingher say, in order, about our guest of honor as poet, critic, fiction writer, and as teacher, will both introduce *them* and celebrate *him.*

First, though, a few words from Fred himself. Asked by me twenty years ago to differentiate between writing prose and writing poetry, he replied:

> The difference between writing prose fiction and poetry is enormous. And it's very difficult for me to switch back and forth. In fact, I always notice, or it seems to me I always notice, a real physiological change that takes place. When you write prose, you're kind of on a bicycle. Prose you think more quickly. But when you write poetry, the whole system slows down. You go more slowly, you go more thoughtfully. And you have a much nicer day when you write poetry than when you write fiction. It's very difficult, and if I really had any advice at all to give the young writers, I would say don't write both of them, unless you really feel impelled because I find it difficult, and I think it's really not good for the nervous system.

[The speakers followed in order: Kelly Cherry, J. Peder Zane, George Singleton, and Marianne Gingher.]

Fred Chappell: A Tribute to His Poetry

Kelly Cherry

It's an amazing pleasure to be here with you to celebrate Fred and his work. He was my poetry teacher some forty years ago, and he remains my poetry teacher today.

Many honors have fallen to Fred Chappell's poetry. A mere few of them are the Bollingen Prize, the Aiken Taylor Award, the Roanoke-Chowan Prize (multiple times), the T. S. Eliot Award, and even—I mention it for the sake of surprise—the Mihai Eminescu Medal from the Republic of Moldovo. Today another honor attends his work. Indeed, his poetry is so widely esteemed that someone who doesn't know his work might be tempted to ask, Is Fred Chappell really *that* good?

All of us here already know the answer to that, but let me nevertheless speak to this benighted hypothetical questioner.

In high school he wrote poetry and fiction, much of it buried or burned before he headed off to Duke, where he studied with the now-famous William Blackburn. His first published books were three magnificent short novels, the first one written when he was, I think, twenty-two or -three, and he had finished a fourth. Then one day, at the Pickwick, a defunct but still legendary bar, he mentioned that, after years of fiction, he was writing poems again and "loving it." On that or another day, he also recounted a hilarious story about a Southern mule, one of many country stories he could call up. My husband asked him why he didn't include homegrown stories like this one in his work. He answered that he was trying to figure out how to bring his rural tales of a childhood in Canton into his work without the work becoming an echo or pale imitation of Faulkner. This is a problem that has bollixed many contemporary Southern writers. Who can forget Flannery O'Connor's pointing out that you don't want to be stalled on the tracks when the Dixie Limited comes through? Fred's first solution was to embed his rural tales in poetry. In 1971 he published *The World Between the Eyes*, a collection of poems that made it clear he was no dilettante in the genre and no wannabe. He has called poetry "the noblest secular endeavor that the mind undertakes." In other words, one—certainly not Fred—does not write poetry for the sake of the honors or riches that may come one's way. "Phoo," he writes in a poem titled "Gold and Mean,"

> . . .Let me be broke flat.
> If possible, in debt.
> I'll go about without a hat.
> I'll get the better of you yet.

When, in the poem "The Farm," he speaks of "[t]he world, locked bone," we understand that the world between the eyes is not limited to the poet's interest in his own mind but includes everything he can perceive, deduce, experience, learn, imagine, and remember. And since he has already, still on the farm, discovered books, this world will include a history of culture, a wealth of ideas. "That decade with Rimbaud," he will say later, in his tetralogy, *Midquest*, "I don't regret ("Rimbaud Fire Letter to Jim Applewhite"), but he has left it behind. He is no longer interested in deranging his senses.

With hindsight we can say that *The World Between the Eyes* anticipated *Midquest*, that glorious work, comprising the books *River*, *Bloodfire*, *Wind Mountain*, and *Earthsleep*, central to the Chappell canon. *World*'s title poem, in particular, introduces threads with which Fred will stitch together what he has called his "sampler." A "lonely" country boy daydreams his future life as a "[m]an of the boring world":

> He dangles his cigarette and his dangerous charm.
> "Ah, Comtesse, it's all too apparent,
> you know little of the ways of the Hindoo;" . . .

The boy has, perhaps, read a few too *many* books, but what is remarkable about him is that he holds "[a] whole society in his head." Moreover, the poem alludes to the four elements of the ancient Greek world, and, a mere four years later, we have *River*, the first of the four books of *Midquest*.

From phrasing to punctuation, from rhyme to reason, a poet must attend to many things while writing a poem. Here are some of the other things Fred attends to in his poetry, splendidly: detail, image, rhythm, lineation, metaphor, simile, narrative or implied narrative, lyricism, drama, voice, tone, wit, sensory information, syntax, stanzaic construction, "*cadence, closure*, and *transition*" ("First Night Come Round Again," in *A Way of Happening: Observations of Contemporary Poetry*), the movement of mind amongst the parts to the whole, and speaking of the whole, form, even if the poem is free-form. Most of us aren't smart enough or talented enough to keep *all* of that in mind; Fred is. But that is not all. The poet must have taken a good hard look at the history of poetry and must, while remembering that history, be simultaneously aware of how the bits and pieces of his own poem resonate with and respond to other poems, or strike out in new directions, or even, with purpose, repeat. As Fred writes, "In order to have adequate bases for comparison as a

practicing poet, you have to know all poetry" (also in "First Night Come Round Again"). Then, to top things off, Fred adds to the mix a dimension often lacking in contemporary poetry: characterization.

For example, in *River* we meet the grandmother of the family portrayed in *Midquest.* As she washes the cans in the milkhouse, she tells her grandson, Fred, about the young men who used to come a-courting. "Of course," she says, "it wasn't hard to pick Frank out,"

> The straightest-standing man I ever saw.
> Had a waxed moustache and a chestnut mare.
> Before I'd give my say I made him cut
> That moustache off. I didn't relish kissing
> A briar patch.
>
> (from "My Grandmother Washes Her Vessels")

In *Midquest* as in real life, Fred is married to Susan. In the poem he can speak for her, as when he slyly has her say, in *Wind Mountain*, "I wish I weren't a writer's wife. / I'd live as harmless as a leaf / And cuddle up in a dear warm life." In real life, Susan speaks for herself. In the poem she is, in one aspect, an incarnation of perfect love, as is Dante's beloved Beatrice. (And for Fred, she is that in real life too.)

The character Virgil Campbell is both the town drunk and a Dantean guide to and through hell. These and other characters are vivid and intimately known, their lives and sensibilities conveyed by speech, detail, and action.

In *Midquest,* Fred looks back on the life he has lived to that point, a life that has been, like all lives, lived in relation to others: parents, grandparents, friends and colleagues and townspeople. Those other lives contribute their own textures to the text of the poem. The young boy who had "[a] whole society in his head" has transferred it to the page, where it will be refigured in readers' minds for many years to come. The rhythms of daily life and country talk are finely observed and conveyed. Future readers will be able to live in Appalachian North Carolina even if it disappears. Fred does not sound like Faulkner, or O'Connor or Eudora Welty or Thomas Wolfe, because he sounds like Fred. The lines and sentences are inflected with knowledge, experience, and a temper of mind that are unmistakably his. Yet, *like* Faulkner, he has rendered his local territory into universality because his characters are, above all, human. We find something of ourselves in all the characters of *Midquest.*

What we receive, then, when we read the poem, is the presentation of emotion philosophically considered. The poem leads us to reflect upon the meaning of life in general, and the meaning of our lives in particular. That is to say, another quality Fred brings to the poem is his blazing, analytic intelligence.

Maybe, after finishing *Midquest*, Fred wanted to write a poem at first glance as opposite to it as possible. His book-length poem *Castle Tzingal* takes us inside a ruined medieval realm haunted by the songs of a severed head. The king is mad, the queen melancholy, the admiral frightened and nostalgic, the royal astrologer a cynic, and a homunculus—eighteen inches tall and at home in a bottle—brings down the whole shebang. The narrative is riveting, the language ravishing. The poem seems to tell us that without art, without poetry, there can be no society at all, no civilization. Thematically, it is not opposite to but the *obverse* of *Midquest*, which shows us that in any society, any civilization, there will always be art.

Source continues the theme of transformation *Castle Tzingal* had dramatized. Both *Source* and the next collection, *First and Last Words*, continue *Castle*'s rich diction. A coquettish cow "toss[es] the silky string / of lucid snot pearly from chin to knees / like a Charleston necklace" ("Awakening to Music"). Night brings "a row / Of orderly stars like punctures in a vein" ("Score"). Dogs sleeping on a porch are "warm spotted lumps of doze and quiver" ("Dipperful"). In "Webern's Mountain," the composer, seeking to reach the creative heights he knows he was born to, must acknowledge the "cello strings dying under the tank treads." The redoubtable animals of *The Wind in the Willows* arrive at slow old age and settle in, except for Toad, who "has taken up / Hang gliding—as a sort of hobby" ("Years Afterward"). A poem titled "Observers," which trades in relativity and quantum mechanics, attracts us with its wit and then shocks us as it becomes a reminder of Nagasaki. These stunningly beautiful books examine the sometimes seemingly alchemical connections between art and life, life and death, death and transfiguration.

The fabulous range of Fred's work has continued to expand, fabulosity upon fabulosity. His book *C* favors the reader with a hundred *short* poems that are variously observations, retorts, wisecracks, riddles, caveats, and celebrations. In one, "Susan is painting her nails / such a brilliant shade of bright / she seems to have sprouted 22 fingers ("LXI"). In another, he parses for us three types of love stories:

> The story of lovers torn apart by war is a thousand pages long.
> The story of lovers whom money separates fills all the stiff ledgers of Europe.
> By the light of a single candle I read the tale of lovers grown old together, climbing faithfully to the darkened landing of the stairway.
>
> ("The Stories")

More recently Fred has published *Family Gathering*, a charming, disarming collection of poems about an extended family. The book is framed

by poems about Elizabeth, an eight-year-old so accurately depicted that anyone who has ever been eight will recognize herself or even himself in her. The speaker of the poems understands her fears, cherishes her innocence, welcomes her inquisitive mind, and holds her in his thoughts as if he could lift her from the page and croon her to sleep. The older members of the family take some pointed jabs, but in a warm, family-gathering way.

Fred's knowledge of Latin and classical literature has been a sturdy foundation for his work, nearly as important as the farm on which he grew up. His most recent book, *Backsass*, reinvigorates the ancient Roman tradition of a no-holds-barred conversation among poets who comment on almost anything: political agendas, literary catfights, and—those Romans rarely blushed—sexual habits. Satire helps us to see what is wrong in the world and, thereby, implies how the world might be improved. We must note that even Fred's satirical verse finds ways to make the world, good *or* bad, good *and* bad, come alive. Where, in all the history of poetry, has there been another poet who could describe the approach of dawn as "the delicate clipclop / of cheerful Aurora on her little gray burro" ("Resolution and Independence")?

In fact, in *Spring Garden: New and Selected Poems*, published in 1995, Fred had already shown us what a truly civilized world might look like: a carefully tended garden, with plantings of varieties of poems in various places, Susan with her watering can. In this garden, "cabbages unfurl / outward and inward like sentences of Proust ("Susan's Morning Dream of Her Garden"), but special regard is given to "herbs that urge to love / . . . for love's the serious matter / We play upon in our enchanted grove" (untitled introductory poem to "In the Garden").

For *Spring Garden*, Fred wrote an abundance of new poems, which, if printed separately, would make a whole other book. Taking his cue from a poem by Renaissance poet Pierre Ronsard, he has arranged the book as a horticultural design, bringing ideas of order, balance, variety of parts, connection and continuity, and overview to the landscape in which his work has grown and, by extension, to his understanding of the world.

As a relatively late book, *Spring Garden* is pensively aware of the passage of time. The little gray burro blurs in the distance. I believe that all serious poets are, from the get-go, acutely attuned to the silence that awaits us in the wings, are haunted by it, and write or speak their poems in the urgency of it. (A poet who sustains his faith in poetry must be ceaselessly creative and, at least to a degree, able to joke about the situation. Dante, with the reassurance of Heaven, wrote, after all, a *comedy*. *Midquest* is a comedy, too, as are the corresponding four novels with which Fred followed it up, as is *Spring Garden*. We speak here of comedy as alleviation and lightness, as perspective and sound sense.) Great poems inhabit silence and illumine darkness, making the ordinary pleasures of our lives as remarkable as miracles.

Fred's poetry sings. His genius is luminous.

Fred hates it when people brag or puff themselves up, and I can imagine how embarrassed he feels right now. But I want to say one more embarrassing, true thing, to the hypothetical questioner who asked if Fred's work really deserves all the honors. Though I don't know as much poetry as Fred does, I read a lot of it, and recently I reread all of his. Do that and it becomes clear, really crystal clear, that the quality, quantity, range, and effect of his poetry are the accomplishment of greatness. He is a poet who will be welcome on Parnassus. Honors are due, every honor is due, and more than that, a certain, actual awe.

Fred Chappell and the Critic's Spirit

J. Peder Zane

Fred Chappell presented my first real problem as *The News & Observer*'s Book Review Editor a decade ago.

Everything had been peaches and cream—reviews came in, I discussed problems and questions with the critics, sent pieces back for rewrites, made changes in the text. Then Fred filed his first review—of a debut novel by a local writer. It began:

> Every once in a long while I wish I were a big-shot literary critic instead of a humbly persistent reviewer. The critic is given latitude to analyze minutely and propound broadly; space and leisure abound. A reviewer writes to hair's-breadth deadlines and is not generally taken seriously when his prose includes adjectives like "enduring," "important" or "magnificent." Such superlatives are expected to carry the imprimatur of the more heavily lauded commentator.
>
> Nevertheless, I feel the need to overstep these informal boundaries in regard to Charles Frazier's first novel, "Cold Mountain."

And so the review continued, a tour de force of plainspoken eloquence, insight and clarity. It was also a huge problem. What to do? I puzzled. What to edit? The man wasn't letting me do my job!

I got over it, eventually—and never reported Fred to the union! Instead I used his work as my model for every piece I edited, every column I wrote. The quality of his first drafts became the final goal for every other piece.

The highest compliment you can pay a baseball player is to call him a five-tool player: It means he excels at all the aspects of the game.

We don't have a similar term for the complete writer—perhaps because there are so few of them. Fred is a five-tool writer: He can write novels, poems, short stories, essays and reviews. He has mastered each of these forms, their very different techniques. Like a musician who is a virtuoso on every instrument in the orchestra—and who can also sing like Pavarotti—Fred's command of style allows him to pick the right mode of expression for his thoughts and dreams.

Fred wrote scores of reviews for me, as the *N&O* poetry columnist, and as the critic I turned to to help readers understand the accomplishments and pleasures of literary giants—*The Iliad*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Don Quixote*, the stories of Hans Christian Andersen and Anton Chekhov.

His pieces were marvels of accessible erudition. Fred's review of a Library of America volume of Henry James' stories, for example, opened with three rich paragraphs offering a penetrating overview of the author's accomplishments and his influence on writers from W. D. Howells and Edith Wharton to Peter Taylor and Louis Auchinchloss. In the fourth paragraph Fred wrote, "He [James] was born in New York City in 1845 into a cultured and talented family," and proceeded to provide a snapshot of the writer's time and place.

What struck me was Fred's awareness of his audience—the reader of a Sunday newspaper interested in a sophisticated discussion of a great American writer, but without a fresh memory of his life and background. That anchoring paragraph came just when the general reader needed it—and Fred knew that. That is mastery of form.

Fred's *N&O* poetry column provided a similar service. As he reviewed the works in question he respectfully grounded readers in the techniques of the form. While helping readers identify poets they ought to read, he also provided short courses in how to read poetry. Such advice is especially necessary now that so many people have lost that skill and back away from poems they try to read because they "don't get" them. How reassuring then to have a poet of Fred's stature say he sometimes feels the same way—and that it's really beside the point. In a review of David Rigsbee's collection, "The Dissolving Island," Fred wrote:

> I think I would assent to the central idea of the poem—that true happiness can be known and remembered only when it has been tested—if I were sure that I had got it right. The fact that I am unsure does not prevent my enjoyment of "Rip." To meditate upon its three well-wrought stanzas leads to other ideas about time: that if it is disregarded, it does not pass; that innocence may be a protection not of, but against, happiness.
>
> For some of Rigsbee's work, mystery adds not only tone and atmosphere but also real power. Is the "dissolving island" of the title poem, the submerging, fabled Atlantis or another place unknown till now? Or is it an allegory about the dissolution of memory as years go by, or about the disappearance of the intolerably vulnerable present moment? The poem works as drama, no matter what interpretation is preferred, and that is the seal of success.

Because the audience was different, Fred took a different approach in his pieces for more specialized publications such as the *Georgia Review*. Addressing aficionados and practitioners, he often offered line by line readings of specific poems in broadly themes pieces—"One Upon a Time: Narrative Poetry Returns?," "An Idiom of Uncertainty: Southern Poetry Now"—that identified trends and issues that for learned people who have not read as widely or thought as deeply as he.

A collection of these pieces, titled "A Way of Happening: Observations of Contemporary Poetry," should be required reading for every aspiring critic. I must confess: I was unfamiliar with many of the poets Fred discusses. And yet, his pieces captivated me.

They still pulse because they are imbued with qualities that Fred found in the work of another great critic and dear friend, Randall Jarrell: A "gift for appreciation," Fred wrote, that is "informed, thoughtful and often highly enthusiastic" but also balanced.

Fred's criticism endures because it's about more than the works or issues discussed; it's about the spirit of its creator who cares enough about someone else's work to pay attention to it, to take it seriously; to invest himself in the it and extend to it the ultimate form of respect: his best effort.

As Fred wrote of H.P. Lovecraft: "Lovecraft took his art seriously; that made all the difference."

I'll chalk 90 percent of Fred success to talent. DNA was good to him. There you have it . But the other 10 percent—how Fred has used those gifts—is just as important. It suggests the good man behind the great writer.

Consider the first line of Fred's *Cold Mountain* review: "Every once in a long while I wish I were a big-shot literary critic instead of a humbly persistent reviewer."

Fred is a first rate critic but he is not a big shot in the striving New Yorker sense of the term. I have no doubt that, had he wanted to, Fred could have been. But he made other choices.

Instead of concentrating on "big books"—high profile novels by celebrated writers—he focused on poetry. And, within that sadly marginalized form, he devoted his gifts, more often than not, on Southern, and, more specifically, North Carolina, writers.

In his farewell poetry column for *The News & Observer* on June 25, 2006, Fred explained this choice:

> During the many years I wrote this long series of reviews, I gave most attention to Tar Heel poets or to poets who have been closely connected to our state . . . .

> If my purpose has been openly partisan, to observe and call attention to North Carolina poetry, it has not been dishonest. I detest boosterism and have praised work only when I thought it solid. . . . So I am able to aver with a clear conscience that poets like James Applewhite and Peter Makuck, Betty Adcock and Eleanor Ross Taylor stand shoulder to shoulder with the best in the country.

In a 1998 piece he was a little more direct:

> I am not really a literary partisan. When someone asks me what distinguishes Southern writing from other American writing, I can reply, with smiling serenity, "It is better than the rest," because I think a fair examination of the books will bear me out.

One doesn't need a poet's knowledge of human nature to appreciate the generosity of that project. It's easy for members of a marginalized group—much less three marginalized groups: poets, Southern poets, North Carolina poets—to believe there's only one small pie with their name on it and that every slice or crumb that goes to another, means one less slice or crumb for themselves.

Fred, instead, championed his rivals for attention—an act far easier to praise than to undertake.

It is this sense of service—to the word, to the craft, to other writers, to his students—that impresses me the most about Fred. Often he'd file a piece so fine I'd think, why is he writing this for us? Then I remember: Because that's who he is.

Beware of Br'er Fred

George Singleton

When first asked if I would like to participate in a Fred Chappell extravaganza—a night to honor Fred's contributions to fiction, poetry, criticism, opera, oenology, boxing, baseball, blues music, domesticated felines, and teaching—it might've taken me about half a nanosecond to respond, "I'd be honored." Professor James Clark told me that Fred had mentioned my name for such an occasion. I said, "Well that makes me feel doubly humbled."

"You'll be talking about his fiction," the professor said. Somewhere between the lines I heard in his voice, "And you will do it right, son."

I hung up the telephone and thought, This is some kind of trick. Fred's playing on me—he knows that I'm no scholar. Fred knows that I would rather spend a day watching my favorite Case knife rust than try to conjure up speculations as to why a novelist and short story writer offers up a certain image, a certain turn in plot, a range of fantastic symbols that might cure what ails Appalachia, the South, America, or the world as we know it.

What new could I say? Intellectuals have written ably about Fred's ear for dialogue and idiom. Who else can come up with such turns of phrase as "Apex is a small hot, flat town, a pimple on the belly of North Carolina," or "I wouldn't ride with you to a dog fight, the way you act," or "He's as mean as a snake with the toothache"? Then there's "He was as tough and warped as a first-growth hickory," and "Selma had been a slow mournful girl with all the cheering aspect of a black shroud," and ". . . as if she had been constructed of soggy newsprint and left to harden." Characters have a choice of either a "mild spring-scallion type of profanity," or "raw, hot Spanish-onion oaths that have lately become so common a part of discourse." Each page in every piece of prose offers up a description or snatch of conversation that makes normal writers get up from their chairs and bang their heads against the nearest wall. Fred Chappell's world is made up of characters with the "free-will of a doorknob" and "the personality of a buzz saw." For me to even consider weighing in on this particular oracle's expertise in the realm of the vernacular would be on par with my ability to deconstruct the high points and pitfalls of this year's Paris fashions.

I considered turning toward something more opaque and likely ineffable—about Mr. Chappell's ability to show us how the human heart is supposed to beat, about the fiction of forgiveness. But, again, entire dissertations have been typed up neatly and published so that the rest of us can consider how we know next to nothing about how we're supposed to relate to one another. I thought about mentioning how—even though he burned down his grandparents' house by sneaking a cigarette at the age of nine—James Christopher was forgiven by his father David in *It Is Time, Lord.* There's the way readers forgive Jan for killing his witless, buffoonish Uncle Hake in *The Inkling,* and how James Parker McClellan, a.k.a. Arkie, forgives Clemmie the streetwalker when she dismisses him continually in *The Gaudy Place.* There's the way the Kirkmans unofficially adopt Johnson Gibbs in *I Am One of You Forever*—echoed in subsequent novels—and the joy and heartache such an action brings. With each novel or collection of stories Fred Chappell lets us know that there's hope, and I would've liked to have expounded on this notion but, again, the bastard scholars beat me to it.

Furthermore, everyone's written about Fred's lyric narrative prowess. They've noted how his region that envelops the Jess Kirkman tetralogy rivals Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Better men and women have commented on Fred Chappell's knowledge and use of myth, of zodiacal truths, and of supernatural communicative bovid ruminants. Full-fledged tenured professors have spun well-researched tales concerning Mr. Chappell's visionary magical realism, coupled with how, evidently, Miguel de Cervantes came back to life and anointed Chappell our perfect practitioner of the picaresque.

So to say the least, I felt troubled and peckish and ornery. I didn't want to stand in front of this audience and present only a mishmash of the catalogued, chronicled, evident, and obvious. So I started thinking about everything that Fred threw at me, and which stuck fiercest. One answer stood out: Tricks. Practical jokes. Rusties. Windies.

I would like to be considered the first person to reveal to the world that, although Fred's been signing his name "ole Fred" since 1963, he, indeed, should be addressed as "young Fred." I want to make it clear that young Fred stays young because his characters, forever—like rascally schoolboys—work nonstop when "those in power" deserve a dose of comeuppance.

Consider Arkie secretly freezing his index finger in ice water before challenging that rutabaga monger to a pain test in regards to letting lit cigarettes burn down the length of their digits. Think about how Arkie, too, kept in his wallet that lucky dollar bill with six sixes in the serial number, awaiting a game of liar's poker.

In *Brighten the Corner Where You Are,* Joe Robert Kirkman—not two pages into the novel—imagines how he can capture a possum, then get back home and put it in his strict-souled mother-in-law's oven, seeing as she needed something to think about. This is the same Joe Robert Kirkman who, once tabbed the acting principal of the schoolhouse, told all of his teachers that a "mysterious and utterly rotten kid," the "Ungodly Terror," was in their midst, slipping garter snakes into desk drawers on the very first day of school. Oh, the teachers kept a look-out for this phantom scug, and just about the time things settled down, Joe Robert would explode firecrackers in lockers, paint doorknobs with kerosene, fling handfuls of ball bearings into classrooms. He filled his own teachers' desk drawers with oatmeal and their restrooms with toads. He wrote insults on the walls and was "relentless in carrying out every naughty schoolboy fantasy he could remember."

In *I Am One of You Forever,* Joe Robert's son Jess Kirkman is drawn into a rusty when his father decides to extract the deluxe wrapped chocolate candies from their foil wrappers and replace them with thumb-sized pullet eggs, so that Jess's grandmother's Bible Circle might enjoy them. In *Look Back All the Green Valley,* Cora Kirkman recalls how while on a European excursion, the tour guide didn't show up. On the bus ride, Joe Robert decides to act as one knowledgeable in local color and history, and regales the trapped tourists with stories of "Duc Phillippe of the Ugly Ankles and the unlucky queen Matilde Who Had No Butt."

Some of the practical jokes work spontaneously; others take patience and timing. In *The Inkling,* Jan breeds mice in four crude cages, then, finally, lures school yard bully Root Hughes over to his house with a promise to show him a rare and legendary spider— "a big white furry spider with three eyes" that ate with its legs. Jan has to keep it inside a shiny cylinder, for it moves quick as a flash, and so on. When Root and Jan finally get to the barn, Jan directs Root to scrunch inside the middle compartment of a three-lidded, tri-sectioned trough. He tells Root he can open up the cylinder once he's inside, that they don't want to take a chance of this rare spider scurrying off. After making threats and accusations, Root Hughes climbs in. Jan secures the lid with a tight peg. Then he fetches the mice and pours them into the adjacent compartments, along with food, the *keek keek keerk* and scratching so terrifying that when poor Root gets out of his predicament, he soils himself. When Root finally gets to the road, Jan calls out, "I bet your mama's really going to lay into you when you get home. . . It's already way past suppertime."

There are hundreds of these scenes, but I believe that Fred probably gets more fun having his characters jape those who profess a holier vocation. In *Look Back All the Green Valley*, Joe Robert Kirkman

sends a letter to six clergymen and promises that he'll donate a good $200 each to their congregations if they'll meet him one Saturday at Virgil Campbell's Bound for Hell Gro. and agree to one answer. These hard-shell preachers, drawn to the word "profitable" in Kirkman's summons, all show up early. When Joe Robert arrives he spells it out: He's visited all of their houses of prayer, and he's noted that each of them has specified a different prophecy for the end of the world. One minister speculates that it'll occur on July 20, 2000. The others have it down to 2010, 1985, 1999, and 1988. One Reverend Butloe, through verses and hidden mathematic equations tucked inside the Old Testament, has the world already ended in 1883.

"The problem I have as a businessman with a little money to invest," Joe Robert says, "is that I am all confused. I need to make a long-term investment or two to take care of my children and grandchildren and to make sure we don't lose our farm out of the family to taxes or bad times. So I need to know exactly when the world is going to end." He asks the preachers to get on their knees and pray together, to read their Bibles and consult the highest authorities—"and then arrive at an agreed-upon date among you when the world will end.. . . I need the year, the month, the day, and, if possible, the very hour." That done, Joe Robert promises, he'll divide twelve-hundred dollars between them evenly.

After a spell of not hearing back from the ministers, Joe Robert sends word that he's learned through a radio preacher that the world is going to end in 1975, and that he—Joe Robert Kirkman—would be asking banker Bob Brendan to move all of his investment capital into a sure-fire winner. It doesn't take long for Bob Brendan to call Joe Robert and ask what gives, seeing that all these Holy Roller preachers scattered around Harwood County have been asking where Joe Robert plans to invest. They offer bribes. They ask for secrecy, et cetera. By the end of the ruse, the preachers actually send money in plain brown envelopes to a post office address set up by Kirkman, wanting in on the no risk stock. In turn, he sends them flyers for his sure-fire pick: Satanic Enterprises's Amalgamated. And although he sends back the money after claiming Satanic Enterprises' sudden bankruptcy, Joe Robert includes sympathy cards with "The wages of sin is death" written inside.

So this is the practical-joking world of young Fred Chappell's fiction. I won't even go into how a poetic alter ego character named Fred Chappell shows up at times. If I were a scholar, I might connect how Fred was brought up in the mountain community of Canton, North Carolina, in the heart of the Cherokee nation. Rabbit, the Trickster, plays a prominent role in Cherokee myths, legends, and tales. I believe some of those stories might have rubbed off on Fred, and that he naturally received the tradition. Perhaps he should be no longer tabbed ole Fred or young Fred, but Br'er

Fred. What matters is this: I feel fortunate that he passes the trickster tradition down to the writers he tutors, keeping us all from banging our heads to the wall, awe-struck by his horripilative virtuosity.

Ole Fred, Teacher for Life

Marianne Gingher

1969. I'm editor of my college literary magazine at Salem College in Winston-Salem. I'm reading poetry like a fiend and writing it like one. All my poems sound like Gerard Manley Hopkins on crack cocaine. My friend Carilee writes poetry, too, but her poems are mellower than mine because she's been taking a poetry writing class with a young visiting writer, Robert Morgan, who's just fresh from studying with Fred Chappell at UNC-Greensboro. It's Robert Morgan, Fred's earliest protege, who tells her about a writing contest sponsored by the *Corradi* literary magazine at UNCG, and both of us enter our poems. We don't win prizes, but the editor prints a poem by each of us in the Literary Festival issue and invites us to a celebration banquet.

I'm driving a little Opel GT two-seater sports car and it's a spring evening when we set out, wind in our hair, John Lennon and the Plastic Ono Band on the radio singing "Give Peace a Chance." Behind us, folded up in the rumble seat is Robert Morgan himself who needed a ride. He's skinny and as awkward as a pile of coat hangers, wears a scarecrow's flannel shirt, and seems colossally shy, but when one of us asks who *his* poetry teacher was, he brightens like a bear coming out of hibernation and he tells us Fred Chappell stories the entire thirty miles to Greensboro.

After the banquet, Robert Morgan invites us to join him for drinks over at Fred and Susan's (he needs a ride back to Winston-Salem, remember, and we are it). Maybe he asks Fred and Susan if we can tag along; maybe not. But I'll never forget the generosity with which both Fred and Susan offer us silly little rotten poet party crashers into their home. With open-hearted interest in who we are and how Robert knows us and what we like to read and so forth. For some inexplicable reason, Susan Chappell is wearing a rubber mustache that night. Fred asks her why she's wearing it but she won't say. He says she looks much prettier without it. But Susan shrugs; she likes wearing it. Fred tries to ignore it but it's impossible to ignore, especially when she's engaged in serious conversation, the thing wobbling on her upper lip with a kind of villainous distinction. I love her for wearing it and for perplexing Fred. I don't know Fred at all, but I have already decided that the folks who can perplex him are the ones he finds most fascinating. "But *why* are you wearing it?" Fred asks his

lovely, playful mustachioed wife. Susan, smiling like the love child of Mona Lisa and Groucho Marx, won't tell.

In this way, without either of us knowing, Fred Chappell begins to be my teacher. I watch him watching Susan parade her mysterious costume, patiently waiting for her to explain it, expecting her to do so, living with the puzzlement and thrill of her refusal, observing novelty in the familiar. She's become somebody he doesn't know, page one of a fresh story. It's a magnificent tittle thing, this dynamic: inquisition and ironclad mystery. It's the root of all art.

* * * * *

1971. I'm a school teacher, living in Greensboro, not writing more than scraps these days, and desperate for guidance. Somebody tells me about Fred Chappell's legendary Thursday night workshop: all these hippie drum circle types sitting around in Mclver lounge chain-smoking, wearing berets, and talking about literature like it's a matter of life and death. So one hot August morning, I attempt to register for Fred's class. Tom Kirby-Smith, working the registration table in that sweltering gymnasium, takes my measure like a powerful x-ray, then gives me the bad news. "The class is already packed with MFA-degree seeking students," he says. Don't I know how famous Fred is? That people are clamoring to study with him and often have to wait months to get accepted into the workshop? What drainpipe did I crawl out of? Tom's a serious barricade, tall and official like a bouncer or a bodyguard. I'm tall, too, but suddenly I'm withering into the Little Match Girl of sewer rats, and I burst into tears and flee.

That night, a miracle happens. The phone rings with the rippling golden sound of a harp. It's the archangel Fred Chappell calling. He's heard about my spectacle in the gym, perhaps he even remembers me from the Night of the Rubber Mustache. He's taught my husband. But most importantly he has divined my desperation and has never met a sewer rat with literary aspirations that he didn't treat humanely. "You want to sit in on that class, you come on over Thursday night," he says. The second lesson he teaches me *before* he becomes my teacher is that in the leaky boat of any writing class, there is always room for one more drowning rat.

* * * * *

1972-1974. I am officially enrolled as an MFA student at UNC-Greensboro. I am part of the magical drum circle workshop which doesn't include many hippies at all, just people who have more in common with marginalia than the straight and narrow. We are a jumble of journalists, housewives (desperate and otherwise), Viet Nam vets, teachers, crumb bums, oddjobbers, intellectuals, cynics, dabblers, artists, and cons—but we're *all* writers or trying to be. There's Amos who wears yellow aviator glasses and H. Keith Monroe (what does the *H* stand for is what we all want

to know). There's Kent, Bob, Sally, Tom, Mike and Lizzie, Eve Shelnutt (who we all are afraid of), Chris who becomes the first of us to publish a book, Candy with her straight, dark, waist-length Joan Baez hair, Lynn, Debby, Fambrough, and Guy Lillian, among others. It's the era of bell-bottoms and Earth shoes and nihilistic sneers. Viet Nam's going strong. Why, we ask, are we sitting around writing stories when people our age and younger are off dying for a stupid war? How can we justify our self-indulgence, we ask Fred?

"Would you die for that story you just wrote?" Fred asks one author. It's a serious question that challenges us not to take our writing lightly, not to be trivial.

Fred's brilliance as a teacher manifests in a kind of pithy slam-dunk style of criticism and sockdolager. In class, he says little during the discussion of anybody's story. But he expects to have the final word, and often it's of the lowering of the boom variety. Once, we're discussing a story I've written, heavily influenced by Flannery O'Connor, in which a fella driving a truck loaded with caged chickens destined for the slaughter house pulls into a gas station in the middle of a robbery. A shoot-out occurs and somehow amid gore and flying feathers—I don't think a person is left standing—all the chickens get sprung from their cages. Fred sits there mulling, while the class discusses the merits and flaws of the story. When it's Fred's turn to speak, he lights a cigarette first, draws heavily, as if for courage as well as clarity, shakes his head, glances at me, shrugs in a gesture of apology, then launches his critical grenade: "This here ain't your kind of story, sweetie," he says to me. "This here's nothing but Andy Griffith meets Superfly." How is it that, like my mother, Fred Chappell is always absolutely and mercilessly right?

* * * * *

It's another Thursday night workshop. Ole Fred, as he's taken to calling himself by his mid-thirties, enters McIver Lounge, toting the manuscripts he will read aloud to us. He looks burdened, deadly serious about our work, even if we aren't—and this is his greatest and most frightening gift to us. He sits down heavily, as if he wishes he had good news but can't promise it, casts a gloomy hooded glance around the room, unzips his windbreaker, lights a cigarette, waits for the room to quiet, and for Guy Lillian to put away his pencils. Guy Lillian is *always* drumming his pencils.

If Fred sometimes seems uneasy, even a tad embarrassed, about the yoke of authority under which he labors to enlighten us, he has the wisdom of all great teachers never to appear defeated by the sullen or the huffy or the untalented. His style of teaching isn't eloquent persuasion. He goads and grumbles, gnashes his teeth, hoots, boos, guffaws, lays his hands on the

muck of us and gets himself good and dirty. He has no truck with the smart alecks or slackers or the strutters too proud for a taste of humble pie. He takes it for granted that we share his appetite for improvement.

I'm sure there were Xerox machines back then and that our manuscripts could have been duplicated. But Ole Fred prefers to read them aloud, anonymously, in a gravelly monotone. After he finishes reading a story, he stokes up a cigarette and simply puffs it for a while, rolling the butt between the tips of his fingers, studying it, teaching us more about the power of the pause than he probably ever realizes.

Finally he booms out one of our names, demanding comment. It's a torturous roll call, but one by one, he coaxes us out. "Marianne!" he growls, "Tell me what you think about this story."

Out of the hundred of stories I am required to remark upon, I remember my comments about only one. What I think about that story is that it's weak and fragmentary. There don't seem to be any characters, just a landscape. I don't know what it's *about.*

"Well," I begin tentatively. "I don't think that what you just read is a story." Emboldened by the heady rush of unchecked honesty, I say with conviction: "Nope, it's *not* a story."

In the silence that follows, I can hear the thunderous roar of ashes elongating upon the tip of Ole Fred's cigarette, the wind whistling in the caves of somebody's nostrils. Outside the dark window a leaf unhinges from a tree, scuttles down the air, and lands on the sidewalk. It's a maple leaf; I can tell by the five-pronged sound of its landing,

The dismay on Fred's face seems to fill the room. It's as if one of the Presidential heads from Mt. Rushmore has broken off and is avalanching in my direction—that's how hard the solemnity of his judgment is bearing down on me: "Oh lord," he says quietly. "Oh lord." And the long ash on the wand of his cigarette hisses, drops, and slithers towards me, fangs bared.

The room has grown so tropical that Sally Anderson slips off her sweater and fans herself with a book; Amos Johnson removes his yellow aviator glasses and eats them. Eve Shelnutt simply vanishes, as if sitting in proximity to such a fool has exposed her to intellectual leprosy. There arises from Debby Seabrooke a keening that dims the light; and Candy Flynt passes me a lethal dose of hemlock in a Parker pen ink cartridge.

"If you know so well what a story is not," Fred Chappell says to me on that dark and stormy night, "then perhaps you can now tell all of us what a story is."

* * * * *

It has taken me a lifetime of writing, reading, thinking and teaching to make a dent in answering that question. It's still as elusive and

provocative to me as Susan Chappell's rubber mustache. It has no final answer. And isn't that the point? Fred's challenge: to go out into the writing life and seek better answers but not only ones. Fred *slanted* his knowledge at us students rather than beaned us with it; he inspired us to read with our hearts as much as with our brains; he let his wit lead him, not his disappointments or regrets; he knew how to laugh in all the right places. "There are two books you've got to read," he said to me once during a tutorial. "Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and William Price Fox's *Ruby Red*." Which of them should I read first? I asked. He glanced down at my scribble-scrabbled manuscript, looked back up at me, lit a cigarette, dragged deep of its smoky nectar, ruminated a while, no rush. His considered opinion was always worth the wait. "Start with *Ruby Red*" he said and did not explain why. "Okay, back to editing." He skimmed a page of my manuscript and crossed out a word "See?" he said. I'd never edited anything in my life. "You crossed out a word." "Yep, I did. That's how you edit. Now you know." I nodded, but I did not know. I wanted him to believe I knew and so I promised myself I would learn. His genius was extracting promises from you that you made to yourself which happen to be the hardest promises to break. He was big on giving students enough rope to hang themselves and sometimes I did, but most writers are cats and have nine lives and we're capable of hanging ourselves lots of times, and still landing on our feet.

I wouldn't be standing here as a writer and a teacher if it had not been for Fred Chappell. There probably isn't a writer in the state of North Carolina that he hasn't befriended or championed or mentored in some important way. Some of you may not know him personally. But if you get a chance to shake his hand, do it; if you get the chance to have a conversation with him, do it. If he gives you lots of rope, try hanging yourself with it and if you land on your feet, you'll have gained a lot. Read all his books and then read them again. Get to know him any way you can and Fred Chappell will become your teacher for life.

The banquet speakers—Kelly Cherry, J. Peder Zane, George Singleton, and Marianne Gingher, respectively—are pictured in the first four photos. The other four views capture the reactions of Fred Chappell and his wife Susan to remarks of their fellow literati. Ms. Gingher mimics her professor's exasperation—cigarette and all—when she read her first composition to Chappell's writing class.

Fred Chappell at top is speaking on "Center of the Universe" in Cone Auditorium. The next four photos show the poet with Dannye Powell, Kelly Cherry and Burke Davis, Martin Brinkley, and Barbara Moran. At bottom UNCG Chancellor Patricia Sullivan chats with Fred's son Heath and sister Becky Anderson. Finally, Susan Chappell and son Heath laugh with Fritz Janschka.

In the top four photos, Fred Chappell is shown with, respectively, James Applewhite, Flo Snider, Willis Whichard, and Fred's sister Becky Anderson. Next is Becky with, first, John Lang, and second, Michael Parker. The Chappells' son Heath is shown at bottom alone and then with his mother Susan. Accompanying pages contain a sampling of pictures made during the evening.

A Special North Caroliniana Society Award To William Brantley Aycock

In the presence of friends and former colleagues, Dr. William Brantley Aycock, Chancellor Emeritus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was presented a special North Caroliniana Society Award at a ceremony held in the George Watts Hill Alumni Center on 22 March.

Dr. Judith Wegner, former Dean of the UNC School of Law, traced the remarkable career of the Wilson County native who grew up in Selma. A graduate of North Carolina State University, Aycock received a master's degree in history from UNC and taught in high school until World War II. He joined the army, rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel, led an infantry regiment in battle against the Germans, and returned home with three medals for bravery—Silver Star, Bronze Star, and Legion of Merit. Aycock came back to Chapel Hill to study law, and even before receiving his degree, he was elected to the Law School faculty. For a time he was personal assistant to Dr. Frank Porter Graham, the United Nations negotiator between Pakistan and India over the state of Kashmir. Elected chancellor in 1957, his term of office coincided with volatile political activities on the campus, the most troubling of which was the controversy over the speaker ban law that was passed by the legislature and eventually declared unconstitutional. During those years, the university's enrollment increased from 7,000 to 9,500, and when he stepped down in 1964, he returned to the School of Law, where he repeatedly won the McCall Teaching Award and was designated a Kenan Professor. Aycock retired in 1989 after 39 years of teaching, and he now lives in Carolina Meadows.

Grace Mewborn Aycock, wife of the chancellor emeritus for 55 years, died in 1996, but members of his family—daughter Nancy and her husband Dan Leigh, and son William Preston Aycock and his wife Alexa, and their families—were in the audience.

In his acceptance talk, Chancellor Aycock reminisced about a study group of which he was a member while in law school. Each member of the quintet became intimately involved with their alma mater—William C. Friday as the first president of the UNC System; William A. Dees, Jr., as first chairman of the Board of Governors; J. Dickson Phillips as dean of the School of Law; John R. Jordan, Jr., as the third chairman of the Board of Governors; and, of course, Aycock himself. Dees died last year, but the others were together to celebrate the award bestowed on their classmate.

In the top photo, current Chancellor James Moeser congratulates Chancellor Emeritus William B. Aycock as UNC President Emeritus William C. Friday looks on. The speaker, Judith Wegner, is in right background. At bottom, left to right, are J. Dickson Phillips, Jr., William B. Aycock, William C. Friday, and John R. Jordan, Jr.

The North Caroliniana Society

Wilson Library, Campus Box 3930
Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514-8890
Telephone (919) 962-1172; Fax (919) 962-4452; hgjones@email.unc.edu; www.ncsociety.org

Chartered on 11 September 1975 as a private nonprofit corporation under provisions of Chapter 55A of the *General Statutes of North Carolina*, the North Caroliniana Society is dedicated to the promotion of increased knowledge and appreciation of North Carolina's heritage through the encouragement of scholarly research and writing in and teaching of state and local history, literature, and culture; publication of documentary materials, including the numbered, limited-edition *North Caroliniana Society Imprints* and *North Caroliniana Society Keepsakes*; sponsorship of professional and lay conferences, seminars, lectures, and exhibitions; commemoration of historic events, including sponsorship of markers and plaques; and through assistance to the North Carolina Collection of UNC-Chapel Hill and other cultural organizations with kindred objectives. With an entirely volunteer staff and a motto of "Substance, not Show," the Society is headquartered in the incomparable North Carolina Collection in UNC's Wilson Library.

Incorporated by H. G. Jones, William S. Powell, and Louis M. Connor, Jr., who soon were joined by a distinguished group of North Carolinians, the Society was limited to a hundred members for the first decade. It elects from time to time additional individuals meeting its strict criterion of "adjudged performance" in service to their state's culture—i.e., those who have demonstrated a continuing interest in and support of the historical, literary, and cultural heritage of North Carolina. The Society, a tax-exempt organization under provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, expects continued service from its members, and for its programs it depends upon the contributions, bequests, and devises of its members and friends. Its IRS number is 56-1119848. Upon request, contributions to the Society may be counted toward Chancellor's Club membership. The Society administers a fund, given in 1987 by the Research Triangle Foundation in honor of its retiring board chairman and the Society's longtime president, from which over 260 Archie K. Davis Fellowships have been awarded for research in North Carolina's historical and cultural resources. The Society also sponsors the North Caroliniana Book Award, recognizing a book that best captures the essence of North Carolina, and it confers the William Stevens Powell Award upon a senior student who has contributed most to an understanding of the history and traditions of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It provides prizes for students in the National History Day.

A highlight of the Society's year is the presentation of the North Caroliniana Society Award to an individual or organization for long and distinguished service in the encouragement, production, enhancement, promotion, and preservation of North Caroliniana. Starting with Paul Green, the Society has recognized Albert Coates, Sam J. Ervin, Jr., Sam Ragan, Gertrude S. Carraway, John Fries Blair, William and Ida Friday, William S. Powell, Mary and James Semans, David Stick, William M. Cochrane, Emma Neal Morrison, Burke Davis, Lawrence F. London, Frank H. Kenan, Charles Kuralt, Archie K. Davis, H. G. Jones, J. Carlyle Sitterson, Leroy T. Walker, Hugh M. Morton, John L. Sanders, Doris Betts, Reynolds Price, Richard H. Jenrette, Wilma Dykeman, Frank Borden Hanes, Sr., Maxine Swalin, Elizabeth Vann Moore, W. Trent Ragland, Jr., W. Dallas Herring, John Hope Franklin, Betty Ray McCain, Joseph F. Steelman, William B. Aycock, Fred Chappell, and, on its sesquicentennial, the North Carolina Collection.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS (2007)

Willis P. Whichard, *President*
Archie K. Davis (1911-1998) and William C. Friday, *Presidents Emeriti*
William S. Powell, *Vice-President*; H. G. Jones, *Secretary;* Martin H. Brinkley, *Treasurer*
H. David Bruton, Kevin Cherry, James W. Clark, Jr., Dana Borden Lacy,
Nancy Cobb Lilly, Dannye Romine Powell, W. Trent Ragland, Jr., John L. Sanders
Ex Officio: Archives and History Director, North Carolina Collection Curator
Directors Emeriti: Frank Borden Hanes, Sr., Betty A. Hodges, Edward L. Rankin, Jr.,
Robert W. Scott, William D. Snider

NORTH CAROLINIANA SOCIETY AWARD RECIPIENTS

1978	*Paul Green*	*1994*	*H. G. Jones*
1979	*Albert Coates*	*1995*	*J. Carlyle Sitterson*
1980	*Sam J. Ervin, Jr.*	*1995*	*LeRoy T. Walker*
1981	*Sam Ragan*	*1996*	*Hugh M. Morton*
1982	*Gertrude Sprague Carraway*	*1997*	*John L. Sanders*
1983	*John Fries Blair*	*1998*	*Doris Waugh Betts*
1984	*William C. & Ida H. Friday*	*1999*	*Reynolds Price*
1985	*William S. Powell*	*2000*	*Richard H. Jenrette*
1986	*Mary & James Semans*	*2001*	*Wilma Dykeman*
1987	*David Stick*	*2002*	*Frank B. Hanes, Sr.*
1988	*William M. Cochrane*	*2003*	*Maxine Swalin*
1989	*Emma Neal Morrison*	*2004*	*Elizabeth V. Moore*
1990	*Burke Davis*	*2004*	*Trent Ragland, Jr.*
1991	*Lawrence F. London*	*2005*	*W. Dallas Herring*
1992	*Frank Hawkins Kenan*	*2005*	*John Hope Franklin*
1993	*Charles Kuralt*	*2006*	*Betty Ray McCain*
1994	*Archie K. Davis*	*2006*	*Joseph F. Steelman*
1994	*North Carolina Collection*	*2007*	*William B. Aycock*
		2007	*Fred Chappell*

FOR USE ONLY IN
THE NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION

Form No. A-368, Rev. 8/95